

The Challenge to e-Learning

“We now live in a multiplex world of many voices and ideas, mediated by the internet. At the forefront in using these digital technologies is the e-learning industry”.

Do you think that e-learning will survive the recession? I think so (naturally!): E-learning is recession-proof and if anything is going to support the re-growth of Ireland as a knowledge economy, technology-based training will need to be at the heart of it.

That's easy to say, but less easy to justify. Will the economic, organisational, and social value of e-learning outweigh traditional responses to downturns – which has been to axe spend on training? What can practitioners do to ensure the survival and the growth of e-learning?

I would suggest that through familiarisation and use over the past decade, learners' expectations are now more aligned with what can be achieved (and perhaps more importantly how it can be achieved) using learning technologies. As instructor-led training costs escalate, firms are more willing to invest in e-learning and I believe this trend will grow over the next 12 to 18 months.

Content development methodologies
The development of (relatively) easy-to-use authoring tools like Captivate, Articulate (and a whole raft of others); the emergence of the Rapid E-Learning development methodology, and the Disintermediation Principle means that e-learning has fewer up-front costs associated with it than at the turn of the century. Similarly, if it's done correctly at the outset, ongoing maintenance and support costs are lower than they ever

have been. By developing content with smaller, more flexible teams, the value proposition of e-learning has been enhanced, and the total cost of ownership has been significantly reduced. Outside of e-learning, the take-up of podcasting and streamed media on sites like Blogger and YouTube demonstrates that the user-friendliness of tools and technologies has extended into the community at large.

The Read/Write Web

Who would have thought in 2000 that blogging, social networking, wikis and podcasts would be as big a part of everyday life as they are now? At the start of this century, the Web (and e-learning) could at best be described as a half-duplex medium; it was pretty much all one-way traffic. Since then, the development of the Read/Write Web has facilitated knowledge-sharing, folksonomies, social interaction, and, key to all this, reciprocity. We now live in a multiplex world of many voices and ideas, mediated by the internet. At the forefront in using these digital technologies is the e-learning industry. By using these tools to develop content I feel we can demonstrate quite effectively that e-learning has a value now that it did not have a decade ago. I would assert that this is particularly true if you take a social-constructivist approach to learning.

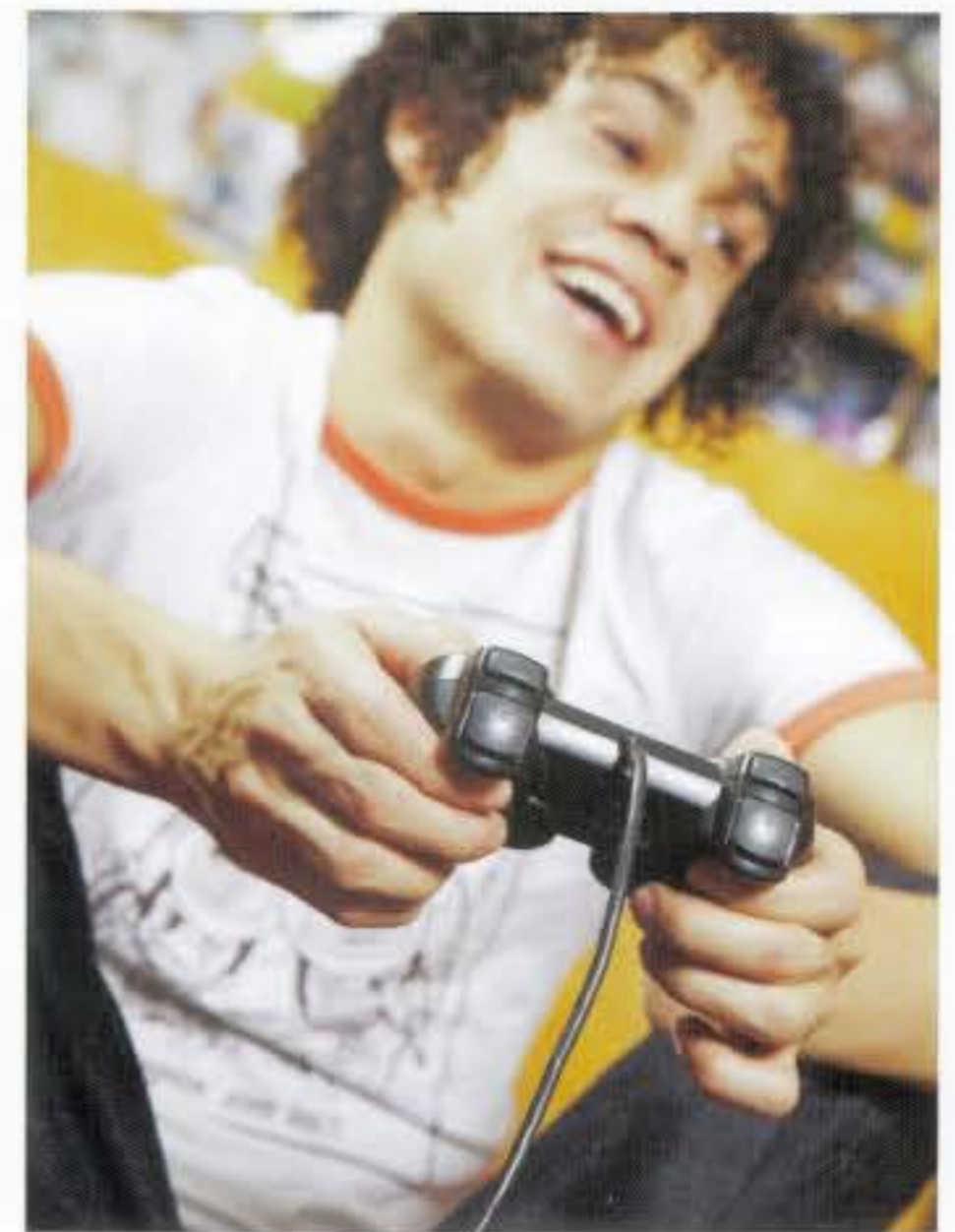
The PlayStation Generation

Along with the development of digital technology, the 'PlayStation generation' is entering the workforce. In his essay *Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants* (2001), Marc Prensky declares:

“... Today's average college graduates have spent less than 5,000 hours of their lives reading, but over 10,000 hours playing video games (not to mention 20,000 hours watching TV). Computer games, email, the Internet, cell phones and instant messaging are integral parts of their lives.”

We now have a generation of workers comfortable with and practised in the concepts and use of e-learning - take a

look at the resources available on www.skool.ie, an initiative for second-level students in Ireland. I was involved in the development of the first iteration of this site, and it's changed a lot (for the better) since we took those first steps creating it nine years ago.



Similarly in third-level education, there have been significant developments in on-line learning and it has become quite embedded in the pedagogy employed by universities: tools like Moodle enable students to upload coursework, take tests, build their own knowledge bases and wikis, and have on-line discussions through a single point of access. This generation is in the workplace right now and will expect to learn new skills as their careers develop by continuing to use the tools and technologies that they have used to date: that is, by using e-learning.

About the Author

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